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The Hollywood Musical

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A Utopian Discord: *La La Land*'s Deviation from Golden Age Hollywood

Musicals' Utopianism

In early Hollywood musicals, utopianism, which allowed the audience to temporarily escape into a better world where real-world complexities and anxieties do not exist, was a prevalent theme that permeated the majority of films, often considered as the “central thrust” of entertainment (Dyer, 222). In *The Pirate*, when Manuela liberated herself by singing out her longing for freedom and true love passionately, we felt that the captivating energy transcended the mundane; In *42nd Street*, as exposed to the spectacle of unified pretty girls accompanying with Berkely's magnificent stage settings and camera movements, we enjoyed the dreamlike visual delicacies; In *Meet Me in St. Louis*, when the initially stern father finally decided to stay in St. Louis and genuinely integrated into the family, we savored the harmonious family life we envisioned.

The utopianism depicted in these films varied, since it was never a “model of utopian worlds”, but rather the “feeling it embodied” (Dyer, 222). This sense of utopianism encouraged people at that time to dream big and chase for what they dreamed. The utopia presented on screen provided a wonderland for those who faced scarcity and challenges in their real lives, such as wartime conditions, economic decline, and unemployment.

As time flies by and the scarcity caused by social conditions has changed, it is worth examining the portrayal of utopianism in contemporary films. One such film is *La La Land*, directed by Damien Chazelle in 2016 which pays homage to many

musicals in the Golden Age of Hollywood. Drawing inspiration from classics like *Singing in the Rain*, *The Band Wagon*, *Sweet Charity*, *Broadway Melody of 1940* etc., does *La La Land* maintain the same sense of utopianism? If not, what's the gap between *La La Land*'s portrayal of utopia and the old Hollywood musicals'? Does *La La Land* even provide a world as utopian as its name suggests? By addressing these questions and comparing *La La Land* with some musicals from the Golden Age of Hollywood, I contend that *La La Land* deviates from the traditional utopia established by its predecessors. Specifically, I will examine from the perspectives of "intensity", "energy," and "community," three essential elements when communicating the sense of utopianism according to Richard Dyer's categories (Dyer, 225). To concretize the three categories, I will correspondingly analyze the love relationship between two protagonists, the dance, and the sense of community portrayed in *La La Land*.

The Ambiguous Love Relationship

In old Hollywood musicals, characters often succeeded both in romantic relationships and personal dreams. For example, in *The Pajama Game*, the workers gain a raise in salary while the leader of the workers' union and the superintendent, two seemingly hostile roles, compromised, persisted, and eventually got together. In *The Band Wagon*, the faded star acted by Fred Astaire made his triumphant comeback and fell in love with the ballerina whom he initially resisted collaborating with. In *Meet Me in St. Louis*, Esther fulfilled her dream of staying in St. Louis and married John. The endings of attaining both dreams and love, which was often a struggle for

most people in reality, presented the audience with spiritual solace and a utopian world.

In *La La Land*, however, the love relationship between the two protagonists has an ambiguous ending, which diminishes the intensity, defined as the “experience of emotions directly and unambiguously,” as well as the sense of utopianism (Dyer, 225). As Mia and Sebastian strive to achieve their career ambitions, it becomes increasingly hard for them to find a balance between love and work, leading to their breakup. However, despite their separation, Sebastian still drives a long way to Mia’s home to encourage her to attend the third audition. After the audition, they sit on a bench and exchange affectionate and gentle looks, which creates an illusory and transient love utopia for the audience. When I see this scene, I expect either of them to suggest rekindling their relationship, but neither does. At this point, I realize that this momentary utopia giving the audience hope is built just to be destroyed. The purposeful choice of constructing a utopia then destructing it adds to the realism of the film, forcing the audience to wake up from the utopian fantasies.

Years later, Mia and Sebastian encounter each other at Sebastian’s bar, “Seb’s”, named by Mia. As Mia leaves, they exchange a smile with nostalgia, encouragement, farewell, blessings, and an ambiguous love, but they are never able to tell each other their feelings. This incongruity of their emotions and expressions clearly breaks the sense of utopianism which “presents a complex feeling in a simple and direct way, not ‘ambiguous’ as it is in day-to-day life (Dyer, 226).” Mia and Sebastian's relationship, with its love, misunderstandings, mutual support, and quarrels, encompasses not one explicit feeling, but a complex amalgamation of emotions, mirroring the intricacies of

everyday love relationships. If one intense emotion represents a single path of escape into the utopia, then complex emotions can slow down the process of choosing which way to escape into and diminish the utopianism of each individual path. When Mia ultimately walks out of “Seb’s,” Mia and Sebastian’s uncertain love and inability to reconcile evoke a final sense of pity in the audience, leaving behind lingering sorrow and regret instead of utopianism. The ambiguous ending of their love story in *La La Land* fails to provide the audience with an emotional release, and the real-life regret of unrequited love remains unresolved in the film.

Unlike those Golden Age musicals, in *La La Land*, career success comes at the price of the couple’s separation. As Richard Dyer points out in his article “Entertainment and Utopia,” “Entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide (Dyer, 222).” When both love and personal dreams, what the audience crave for but struggle to achieve in real life, cannot be realized simultaneously in a direct way, some of the audience’s hardships cannot find an escape. The world depicted in *La La Land* is not significantly better or simpler than the audience’s daily lives, leading to a significant reduction in the sense of utopianism.

The Constrained Dance

Individual energy, proposed by Leo Braudy, is what empowers ordinary people to transcend the mundane, pursue their passions, and “break away from the dead hand of the society (Braudy, 144).” In musicals, dance, due to its magical ability to manifest

individual energy, has the power to evoke utopia, making it necessary to be examined when measuring the sense of utopianism. By comparing *La La Land* to two classical Hollywood musicals it pays homage to, it becomes evident that the constrained nature of the dance in *La La Land* hinders the expression of individual energy, resulting in a departure from the utopian quality found in Golden Age Hollywood musicals.

In *La La Land*, one of the most famous dancing scenes takes place when the party is over, and Mia and Sebastian are on their way to get the cars. Against the colorful backdrop of the night, the two weary young souls develop a mutual attraction and joyfully dance “A Lovely Night” together. Sebastian grabs the lamppost with one hand and spins half a circle as he sings the first line, which obviously references the movement in “Singing in the Rain.”

In “Singing in the Rain,” when Gene Kelly stayed up the whole night and figured out that he could make a musical to save the abortive sound film *Duelling Cavalier*, he couldn’t suppress the happiness in his heart. Although it was raining heavily outside, he excitedly rushed into the rain and jumped onto the lamppost. Early Hollywood musicals created individual energy by “opposing to the artifices of tradition and social formality (Braudy, 139).” Therefore, as Gene Kelly’s upper body leaned out forcefully, enjoying the rain and the wind caressing every inch of his skin, he defied the tradition of avoiding inclement weather and embraced life’s adversities. This gave rise to an abundance of individual energy, a utopian quality that people might lack when facing dissatisfaction in real life. With open arms and only one foot planted on the lamppost, Kelly embodied a delightful bird, exuding boundless energy, lightness, and

freedom that no earthly formality could drag him down from soaring towards the utopia. The camera seamlessly followed Kelly's movement, moving up alongside him, propelling his individual energy to the peak. At this moment, he no longer needed to pursue the utopia; he was already immersed in it, and he effortlessly transmitted the sense of utopianism to the audience.



Figure 1. "Gene Kelly on the lamppost," Stanley Donen, *Singing in the Rain*, 1952.

In *La La Land*, however, the constrained nature of the dance deprives the performer's individual energy. Unlike the exuberant movement of Gene Kelly jumping up the lamppost, Sebastian remains on the ground level with limbs held in a tightly controlled, rigid position. The rigidity compresses Sebastian's subtle affection for Mia within his body, preventing it from emanating as permeable energy. The constrained nature of the movement implies a sense of Sebastian's self-restraint, inhibiting the audience from feeling his inner ecstasy. Similarly, the camera stays predominantly at ground level, employing comparatively static shots. Capturing Sebastian in a wide shot, the camera further subdues Sebastian's energy, distancing him from the audience, hindering them to resonate with his emotions. The dimly colored background engulfs

Sebastian, exacerbating his inability to break free from nervousness and concerns. As suggested by Braudy, “musicals derive their utopian world from individual energy, which is expressed through the assertion of personal force (Braudy, 140).” Consequently, even though emotions do exist in “A Lovely Night,” they are not assertive and impactful enough to become energy due to the constrained movements, camera work, distance, and the subdued color tone, thereby impeding the audience’s perception of utopianism.

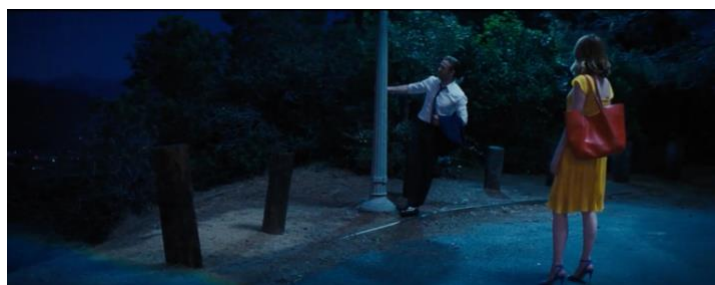


Figure 2. “Sebastian’s imitation of holding the lamppost,” Damien Chazelle, *La La Land*, 2016.

Also unfolding amidst the serene city nightscape, another classical Hollywood musical that “A Lovely Night” pays homage to is “Dancing in the Dark” from *The Band Wagon*. How the constrained nature of the dance movements in “A Lovely Night” reduces the sense of utopianism is also highlighted when compared to “Dancing in the Dark.”

In “Dancing in the Dark,” Tony and Gabrielle executed synchronized movements with precision. Their inclined arms and extended legs maintained consistent angles when doing the movement of one arm up and the other down, creating parallel lines. Their expertise and flawless dance skills exuded a spontaneous and effortless quality.

The perfection and fluidity of their dance captivated the audience, providing a heavenly enjoyment akin to utopianism.



Figure 3. “Dancing in the Dark,” Vincente Minnelli, *The Band Wagon*, 1953.

Nevertheless, in “A Lovely Night,” as Mia and Sebastian perform a similar movement, they struggle to control their bodies, causing their limbs to float powerlessly in the air. Their nervousness and lack of proficiency can be easily seen from their asynchronization of footwork and hand gestures, destructing their assertion of personal capability and energy. The same movement is repeated multiple times in “A Lovely Night,” which I think disrupts the diversity and improvisation of dance movements. With Mia and Sebastian’s significant edginess and unprofessionalism, their dance is neither a spectacle to me, nor something that evokes my admiration or yearning. The constrained movements caused by their incapability diminishes consummation and easiness which are characteristics of utopianism.



Figure 4. “The dance movement of one hand up and the other down,” Damien Chazelle, *La La Land*, 2016.

Upon comparing the movements, camera work, color tone, and dance skills in *La La Land* with those in the Golden Age Hollywood musicals, a noticeable absence of positive energy, proficiency, and relaxation becomes apparent. The constrained nature of the dance in *La La Land* evokes a departure from the confident, idyllic, and euphoric atmosphere found in classic musicals, emphasizing the constraints and complexities of everyday life.

Little Sense of Community

In Richard Dyer’s “Entertainment and Utopia,” he points out that “community,” which represents “togetherness and a sense of belonging,” contributes greatly to the audience’s perception of the sense of utopianism (Dyer, 225). However, *La La Land* mainly focuses on the two protagonists’ pursuit of dreams individually, without the support of a cohesive group. Unlike Lucky in *The Swing Time*, Sebastian lacks a circle of true friends who share his passion. Similarly, unlike Peggy Sawyer in *42nd Street*, Mia doesn’t have any acquaintances who can secure a leading lady role for her. In the seemingly cheerful world of *La La Land*, the two protagonists experience loneliness:

Mia attends auditions alone, writes the script for her play in solitude, and stages the show single-handedly. Sebastian is the only one wanting to preserve old-fashioned jazz in a new band, and his dream is not even understood by his own sister. This sense of loneliness is precisely what contemporary individuals suffer from, and *La La Land* does not provide the audience with a vibrant fantasy world with friends and support for them to escape into. Thus, compared to Golden Age Hollywood musicals, *La La Land* deviates from the concept of community and fails to depict utopianism.

Some may argue that although *La La Land* mainly focuses on the depiction of individual dreams, it does convey a sense of “togetherness,” contributing to utopianism in its opening sequence, “Another Day of Sun.” In this sequence, amidst a traffic jam, numerous drivers spontaneously burst into energetic dancing and singing. Specifically, there is a scene that exemplifies a strong sense of togetherness as a large circle of people forms around a central dancer. However, when compared to a similar scene in “Once a Year Day” from *The Pajama Game*, *La La Land* falls short in capturing the other crucial aspect of community: a sense of belonging. This deviation from the traditional concept of community prevents the depiction of utopianism.

In “Once a Year Day,” the employees of the pajamas factory gathered at the park for their annual team-building activities. These people shared a common goal of seeking a salary increase, endured the disappointment of it not being approved, and found an emotional release together on this special day. They had already established solid friendships before this event, which presented the audience with a preexisted “network of phatic relationships (Dyer, 225).” The costumes, characterized by similar styles but

diverse patterns represented what Mast called “diversity within unity, (Mast, 10)” fostering a sense of belonging while celebrating individual uniqueness. During the peak of communal excitement in “Once a Year Day,” Gladys energetically danced in the center of the crowd. Encouraged by clapping and support, she showcased exuberant movements, including placing one hand on her head and wiggling her body, accompanied by joyful screams. In a cohesive community, “the energy of the central character can potentially bring the community together in an array around them (Braudy, 140).” Indeed, as depicted in Figure 6, Gladys’ performance acted like a catalyst, drawing more individuals into the center of the circle. They screamed in the same way and did the same movements as Gladys. Finally, everyone started to dance, resulting in a collective emotional climax and supportive utopian atmosphere. The transmission of such energy and harmony instilled in the audience a desire to join their dance. Through observing Gladys’ vibrant solo performance and the skillful group dance, we, as the audience, became a member of the community, feeling the “common values” of mutual support, joy, and sense of belonging in this utopia (Feuer, 2). The camera movement further included the audience into the community by placing us in the inner circle, directly facing the group, and positioning us at eye-level height with other community members seated on the grass. These immersive approaches chosen by “Once a Year Day” not only brought the sense of community to the audience but also directly enveloped us in a utopia filled with beautiful friendships.



Figure 5. “Gladys’s solo in the center of the crowd,” George Abbot, *The Pajama Game*, 1957



Figure 6. “More people joining Gladys’s dance,” George Abbot, *The Pajama Game*, 1957.

In “Another Day of Sun,” as the truck door opens, the drums inside begin to play, attracting more and more drivers to gather around. Three professional dancers take turns performing in the center of the crowd, dancing in different styles such as flamenco and hip-hop. However, their performances lack collaboration, mutual support, or a blending of styles. Instead, the fragmented nature of the performance resembles more of a stunt show or a battle. The drivers who gather around are essentially strangers who have never communicated or exchanged experiences and inner thoughts, making it

challenging for a sense of belonging or community to develop. They are more like a group of onlookers rather than community members, coincidentally brought together by the traffic jam and forming a random circle out of curiosity. There is also no sense of unity in this scene. Looking at Figure 7, my attention is immediately attracted by the middle part of the picture due to performers in more vibrant colors and the high saturated background. However, the overlookers on the left side of the picture, against the grey background of the highway, wear less saturated clothes, further highlighting the performers in the middle rather than keeping the unity and equality of the group. This inequality in individual energy and attention undermines the overall sense of utopianism. Additionally, the high camera angle fails to integrate the audience into the group, reminding them that they are mere spectators rather than actively participating in the singing and dancing.



Figure 7. “Another Day of Sun,” Damien Chazelle, *La La Land*, 2016.

Although *La La Land* presents the audience with a sense of togetherness through its crowd scenes, it falls short in capturing the essence of a community, which entails emotional connection, support, and the sense of belonging. Without these crucial elements, the film fails to effectively pass the sense of utopianism through the screen to the audience, particularly when compared to Golden Age Hollywood musicals that

successfully depicted vibrant and supportive communities.

Conclusion

While *La La Land* draws inspirations from various Golden Age Hollywood musicals, it falls short in presenting love relationships with clarity, liberating individuals with the same level of energy, and fostering a supportive community as effectively as its predecessors. Consequently, it fails to fulfill the three crucial categories in conveying the sense of utopianism: intensity, energy, and community. Contrary to idealized portrayals, *La La Land* consciously opts to depict relationships with ambiguity, individual struggles, and the absence of a cohesive community, shattering the utopian ideals.

La La Land serves as the epitome of a real world where solitude, exhaustions, complexities, and anxieties are inherent aspects of the human experience. In stark contrast to its seemingly lighthearted title, the film does not provide a carefree escape into a utopian realm, like that in the Golden Age Hollywood musicals, in which individuals can effortlessly release their pressures. *La La Land* prompts the audience to contemplate the genuine challenges and dilemmas encountered in life.

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